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## Introduction to Culture

class="introduction"

People  
adhere to  
various rules  
and standards  
that are  
created and  
maintained in  
culture, such  
as giving a  
high five to  
someone.

(Photo  
courtesy of  
Chris  
Barnes/flickr  
)



## Glossary

culture

shared beliefs, values, and practices

society

people who live in a definable community and who share a culture

## What Is Culture?

- Differentiate between culture and society
- Explain material versus nonmaterial culture
- Discuss the concept of cultural universalism as it relates to society
- Compare and contrast ethnocentrism and xenocentrism

“We don’t know who discovered water, but we’re pretty sure it wasn’t the fish” (Carpenter 1970). If the water is to the fish, then what is to the human? Oh no, don't say, "Isn't that the air?" Why? That's because this is a sociology course and because this chapter is specifically about culture. Yes, culture, one of the major social conditions that shapes what we do and how we think, is the answer to this question.

Here is a clarification of this answer. Although the fish doesn't "discover" the water while dipped in the water, if the fish got out of the water, it would painfully notice that the water is missing. Likewise, if people migrate from one society to another, or if their societies are drastically changing, they will notice how firmly their lives have been depending on their own old culture.

This is what actually happened to Europeans whose societies were drastically changing from the old type to the new one, a historically significant event called **modernization**, the main product of the **Industrial Revolution**. Having lost their old social environments and statuses--typically, peasants in small folk villages--many migrated to urban areas, 65% of whom (or 5 million), to the United States, in search for jobs (McKeown 2007).

In the new world, their old characteristics--obedient, honest, hard-working, communal, and docile--lost their values. Rather, for the same reason, for which they had been praised in their old villages, they were now looked down upon, or even discriminated against. The new environments required them to act as individuals not as folks. They must have felt as if they became the fish struggling with the water missing.

Returning to ourselves now, let’s notice that what those Europeans faced was just the starting point of social change that never ends since then.

Today indeed, our world keeps drastically changing under so-called globalization, under which people, money, and goods and services are bewilderingly moving around between, and within, the first world countries and the third world countries. Metaphorically, we've become the fish always trying to find a new way to live in such unknown environments, or maybe trying to return to the water.

Recall the definition of **culture**--a historically developed, yet ever changing set of rules, know-hows, and tools that support social life and survival both on the individual level and on the group level. As social environments keep drastically changing, we need to adjust our own culture to them, all the time, but our reactions to such changing environments are, always, far from uniform; some try to find new ways forward while others try to return to the "water" backward. This variance in our reactions can yield a variety of social issues. For example, some support the idea of "diversity" while others claim "Make America *white* again."



How would a  
visitor from the  
suburban United  
States act and feel  
on this crowded  
Tokyo train?  
(Photo courtesy of  
simonglucas/flickr  
)

## Summary

Though “society” and “culture” are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. A society is an entity in which its members interact with one another under some sets of rules, which include culture. Other than such rules (values and norms), culture also provides traditionally perpetuated ideas (know-hows) and tools that support survival both on the individual level and group level.

## Further Research

In January 2011, a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America presented evidence indicating that the hormone oxytocin could regulate and manage instances of ethnocentrism. Read the full article here:

<http://openstaxcollege.org/l/oxytocin>

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## **Glossary**

cultural imperialism

the deliberate imposition of one's own cultural values on another culture

cultural relativism

the practice of assessing a culture by its own standards, and not in comparison to another culture

cultural universals

patterns or traits that are globally common to all societies

culture shock

an experience of personal disorientation when confronted with an unfamiliar way of life

ethnocentrism

the practice of evaluating another culture according to the standards of one's own culture

material culture

the objects or belongings of a group of people

nonmaterial culture

the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society

xenocentrism

a belief that another culture is superior to one's own

## Elements of Culture

- Understand how values and beliefs differ from norms
- Explain the significance of symbols and language to a culture
- Explain the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
- Discuss the role of social control within culture

## Material vs. Nonmaterial

Every culture is made up of two aspects, namely, **material culture** (any cultural matters that we can see and touch) and **nonmaterial culture** (any cultural practices that we cannot see or touch unless actions taken). Major examples of the former (material culture) include food, shelter, and clothing. Those of the latter (nonmaterial culture) include "norms and values" (discussed below), the language, religion, music, dance, cooking, art, and so on.

Both material and nonmaterial culture are related to "a set of rules, know-hows, and tools that support social life and survival both on the individual level and on the group level," the definition of culture. This means that they summarize, or succinctly stand for, what cultures are for.

## Values and Norms (Nonmaterial)

### Values

Within nonmaterial culture, the most important elements, in terms of attitudes (how people think) and behaviors (what they do), are values and norms. Cultural **values** are socially shared "attitudes" toward what is important and what is not. They vary across societies and change over time.

For example, "Time is money," people say. But it is so only in our modern societies and was not in old types of societies. The clock is set at schools, factories, and offices, indeed, but it was not at farms. It became the indispensable instrument of industrialized and post-industrialized societies (Rifkin 1987, p. 102; paraphrased). Time is money today (in our modern societies) literally for those who are paid on the basis of the number of



hours they worked. It was not the case for farmers in small folk villages (premodern societies).

Other than "time," modern individuals tend to value distinction between achieved statuses and ascribed statuses (which will be discussed in Ch. 5, Society and Social Interaction), between self-interests and group's expectations, between private and public matters, between formal and informal matters, and so on.

### **Norms**

Cultural **norms** govern socially acceptable "behaviors," i.e., they can be seen as rules for what is appropriate to do and what is not. Just like values, they also vary across societies and change over time. This means that following the norm of one's own society may be violating the norm of another society. This can involve "culture shock," a social psychological phenomenon resulting from an encounter with a totally different culture--which is discussed below.

Values and norms are oftentimes closely intertwined. Using the value of "time," for example, organizing an event without caring about time can be violating a norm of middle-class people in modern societies. Likewise, making someone stay in office after hours in modern societies is violating not just a cultural norm but also a formal rule.

Likewise, in our modern societies, in which privacy is valued, visiting other people's place without a call or text message, even if it is totally informal, can be considered the violation of the norm.

### **Cultural Universals**

Again, cultures vary. On the other hand, though, there are cultural practices called **cultural universals** that can be observed in every society, although their forms may vary. This tells us that although cultures vary, human needs seem, to a great extent, universal. For example, the language varies across cultures, but in every society, people speak their language. The language is, thus, a cultural universal. Other examples include: music, dance, art, cooking, funeral, and so forth. Their forms, again, may vary, but every

society maintains these practices one way or another, and thus, they are cultural universals.

On the other hand, though, think about cultural practices that are not cultural universals. To have kids' birthday parties, for example, isn't pizza a kind of "must"? If there were no pizza served, kids would get mad or, at least, puzzled. But is pizza a cultural universal for kids' birthday parties? Or, we need to ask, are birthday parties themselves cultural universal, or to say, does every society have them? Think about it... What about watching TV? Surfing the Internet? Drinking cold beer, listening to headbanging rock music?

## **Ethnocentrism vs. Cultural Relativism--and Its Discontent**

### **Ethnocentrism**

Often, people firmly believe that all other people engage in cultural practices they themselves engage in. To them, in other words, every cultural aspect of their own is culturally universal. For example, some ask, "How do you get the marriage license in your country?" In many countries, unlike the U.S., there's no such thing as "marriage license." Or, "What's the most popular dessert in your country?" Sorry, but "dessert" is a European cultural custom, which although many Americans share, many others don't.

This tendency, in which "one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it," is called **ethnocentrism** (Sumner 2002 [1907], p. 13). It is a self-centered attitude on the group level. The type of group doesn't matter; it can be any, such as race/ethnicity, nations, cities, villages, schools, sport teams, and even gender. If that's about "marriage license" or "dessert," there's no problem. If that's about patriotism or racism, however, ethnocentrism can yield bitter conflicts.

For example, a poem "The White Man's Burden" written at the turn of the nineteenth century not only justified the conquest of non-whites (half devil and half child, according to this poem) by whites, but it even obliged the conquerors to "take up the white man's burden." The spirit of this poem seems to remain intact still today (see, e.g., Easterly 2006).

The ironic aspect of this tendency is, though, that ethnocentrism is negatively related to maturity or knowledgeability. That is, the less mature or knowledgeable, the more ethnocentric, or conversely, the more mature or knowledgeable, the less ethnocentric. This means that when people claim their group's superiority loud (more ethnocentric), they are exposing their inferiority loud (less mature) without noticing as such.

The conquest and colonization involve various events, such as political dominance, economic exploitation of labor power and natural resources, and, among others, **cultural imperialism**, the imposition of culture of the stronger on the weaker. This is an extremely negative aspect of ethnocentrism. For example, Japan annexed Korea in 1910, after which the conqueror launched a program to "Japanize" Korea, ultimately requiring Koreans to adopt Japanese names and worship in Japanese Shinto shrines (see, e.g., Kane et al. 2009).

To be noted, though, cultural imperialism is not unique to colonization, and can happen in some other ways. Anglo conformity, the assimilation ideology dominant until the recent past in the U.S., can be an example; though not related to colonization, this forced immigrants to speak Anglo Saxon's language, English, and follow Anglo norms and values, such as individuality (as opposed to collectivity), self-assertion (as opposed to harmony), and so forth.

Ethnocentrism does not necessarily yield bitter conflicts. Being able to love one's own group is psychologically healthy. If a boy says, for example, "I don't respect my family," there may be some psychologically unhealthy issues in his family. Hence, his parents should say to this boy, "What's the matter? Let's sit and talk."

The same thing can be also said about the nation. Some NFL players began kneeling during the national anthem in 2016, for example, in protest against its alleged racist content. In reaction to this, instead of caring about this protest, the U.S. president fiercely screamed, "Get that son of a bitch [the NFL players] off the field right now!"

### **NFL Players Protesting National Anthem**



Photo courtesy of ShadowProof.com

As the kneeling controversy was spreading nationwide, the NFL league introduced a new policy mandating players and team personnel to either stand for the pregame playing of the anthem or remain in the locker room. Okay, but was this it?

Not so fast. In September, 2018, a major sports apparel company, Nike, decided to use Colin Kaepernick, the former NFL quarterback who started the kneeling protest, for its "Just Do It" campaign as its face. The controversy is going up in frames, anew...

### **Culture Shock**

Ethnocentrism can be so strong that when confronted with a totally different culture, one may experience disorientation and suffer from one's own social identity shaken up. This social psychological phenomenon is called **culture shock**. The aforementioned Europeans who migrated from their small folk villages to urban areas, for example, must have heavily experienced this. Similarly today, the first generation of immigrants may face culture shock as things and actions, normal/valuable in their sending societies, may not be so at all in their host societies.

## Cultural Relativism

According to anthropologist Diane Lewis (1973), anthropology emerged along with the expansion of Europe and the colonization of the non-Western world (p. 582). Although its literal meaning is “the study of humans,” it started as the study of, in reality, non-Europeans, or the colonized. As Europeans studied non-Europeans in their own views, anthropological reports back then could hardly be free from ethnocentric biases, always ranking non-European cultures below their own.

Anthropologist Franz Boas (1931 [1911]) criticized this ethnocentric tendency of anthropological reports in his era, softly suggesting that:

- It is somewhat difficult for us to recognize that the value which we attribute to our own civilization is due to the fact that we participate in this civilization...; but it is certainly conceivable that there may be other civilizations, based perhaps on different traditions and on a different equilibrium of emotion and reason which are of *no less value than ours*, although it may be impossible for us to appreciate their values without having grown up under their influence. (Boas 1931 [1911], p. 225; emphasis added)

His students, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, among others, based upon Boas’s suggestion, led the newer generation of anthropology, and their basic attitudes toward culture known as **cultural relativism** became a dominant view among social scientists in the early 20th century. They maintain that cultures are relative, and that there’s no absolute standard by which cultures can be ranked one over/under another. For example, one speaks French and the other, Chinese. Which is superior/inferior? The answer is: Neither. Cultural relativism, thus, supports the idea of “diversity” or multiculturalism.

## Its Discontent

Recently, however, some have begun arguing against this view. Anthropologist Robert Edgerton (1992), for example, contends in his *Sick Societies* that if a culture maintains customs harmful to its people, especially weak ones (e.g., cannibalism, torture, infanticide, female circumcision, ceremonial rape, and so forth), we should not play with the idea of “relativism.” It’s not relative, but *absolutely* bad.

## Social Changes

### Cultural Lag

Social changes occur often rapidly, but people's mentality tends to have difficulty in catching up with them. This gap between social changes and people's unchanging mentality is called **cultural lag**. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that the Constitution guarantees a right to same sex marriage. This means that any laws or actions that can hinder this right to same sex marriage are considered illegal. This is a big social change. But is people's mentality toward same sex marriage smoothly changing in this direction? If not, that's cultural lag.

When the topic is about "cultural lag," some scholars exclusively (and *erroneously*) focus on the gap between culture and technological innovations (see, e.g., [yourdictionary.com](http://yourdictionary.com), [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org), etc.), but same-sex marriage is not a technological innovation, is it? What causes the confusion? William F. Ogburn, who coined the term "cultural lag," described this common societal phenomenon this way:

The various parts of modern culture are not changing at the same rate, some parts are changing much more rapidly than others; and that since there is a correlation and interdependence of parts, a rapid change in one part of our culture requires readjustments through other changes in the various correlated parts of culture. ... Where one part of culture changes first, *through some discovery or invention*, and occasions changes in some part of culture dependent upon it, there frequently is a delay in the changes occasioned in the dependent part of culture. (Ogburn 1922, pp. 200-1; emphasis added).

As emphasized above, Ogburn wrote "through some discovery or invention." This could mean, for sure, technological innovations but, ah-hah, is not necessarily limited to be so. It could be a new discovery of "marriage equality" for same-sex couples by the supreme court, behind which some people's old mentality seems to lag.

### Cultural Diffusion

Unlike culture shock or cultural lag, **cultural diffusion** can be fun. It's about social changes through "mutual assimilation" or copying each other

in diverse societies. In New York, we can observe a plenty of examples. Some non-Asian people, for example, have tattoos in Chinese characters--whose meaning they may not clearly understand, though. Think about food, as well. American food today, according to Americans, includes French fries, pizza, California role, Hamburger with Swiss cheese... Are these actually American? Really?

## Summary

A culture consists of many elements, such as norms and values. It is important to note that they vary across societies and change over time. Thus, cultural lag is happening all the time, everywhere. In diverse societies observed is cultural diffusion, social changes that involve two or more different cultures.

## Further Research

The science-fiction novel, *Babel-17*, by Samuel R. Delaney was based upon the principles of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Read an excerpt from the novel here: <http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Babel-17>

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## **Glossary**

beliefs

tenets or convictions that people hold to be true

folkways

direct, appropriate behavior in the day-to-day practices and expressions of a culture

formal norms

established, written rules

ideal culture

the standards a society would like to embrace and live up to

informal norms

casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to

language

a symbolic system of communication

mores

the moral views and principles of a group

norms

the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured

real culture

the way society really is based on what actually occurs and exists

sanctions

a way to authorize or formally disapprove of certain behaviors

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

the way that people understand the world based on their form of language

social control

a way to encourage conformity to cultural norms

symbols

gestures or objects that have meanings associated with them that are recognized by people who share a culture

values

a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society

## Theoretical Perspectives on Culture

- Discuss the major theoretical approaches to cultural interpretation

Music, fashion, technology, and values—all are products of culture. But what do they mean? How do sociologists perceive and interpret culture based on these material and nonmaterial items? Let's finish our analysis of culture by reviewing them in the context of three theoretical perspectives: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalists view society as a system in which all parts work—or function—together to create society as a whole. In this way, societies need culture to exist. Cultural norms function to support the fluid operation of society, and cultural values guide people in making choices. Just as members of a society work together to fulfill a society's needs, culture exists to meet its members' basic needs.

Functionalists also study culture in terms of values. Education is an important concept in the United States because it is valued. The culture of education—including material culture such as classrooms, textbooks, libraries, dormitories—supports the emphasis placed on the value of educating a society's members.



This statue of Superman stands in the center of Metropolis, Illinois. His pedestal reads “Truth—Justice—The American Way.” How would a

functionalist interpret this  
statue? What does it reveal  
about the values of  
American culture? (Photo  
courtesy of David  
Wilson/flickr)

Conflict theorists view social structure as inherently unequal, based on power differentials related to issues like class, gender, race, and age. For a conflict theorist, culture is seen as reinforcing issues of "privilege" for certain groups based upon race, sex, class, and so on. Women strive for equality in a male-dominated society. Senior citizens struggle to protect their rights, their health care, and their independence from a younger generation of lawmakers. Advocacy groups such as the ACLU work to protect the rights of all races and ethnicities in the United States.

Inequalities exist within a culture's value system. Therefore, a society's cultural norms benefit some people but hurt others. Some norms, formal and informal, are practiced at the expense of others. Women were not allowed to vote in the United States until 1920. Gay and lesbian couples have been denied the right to marry in some states. Racism and bigotry are very much alive today. Although cultural diversity is supposedly valued in the United States, many people still frown upon interracial marriages. Same-sex marriages are banned in most states, and polygamy—common in some cultures—is unthinkable to most Americans.

At the core of conflict theory is the effect of economic production and materialism: dependence on technology in rich nations versus a lack of technology and education in poor nations. Conflict theorists believe that a society's system of material production has an effect on the rest of culture. People who have less power also have less ability to adapt to cultural change. This view contrasts with the perspective of functionalism. In the U.S. culture of capitalism, to illustrate, we continue to strive toward the promise of the American dream, which perpetuates the belief that the wealthy deserve their privileges.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that is most concerned with the face-to-face interactions between members of society.

Interactionists see culture as being created and maintained by the ways people interact and in how individuals interpret each other's actions.

Proponents of this theory conceptualize human interactions as a continuous process of deriving meaning from both objects in the environment and the actions of others. This is where the term symbolic comes into play. Every object and action has a symbolic meaning, and language serves as a means for people to represent and communicate their interpretations of these meanings to others. Those who believe in symbolic interactionism perceive culture as highly dynamic and fluid, as it is dependent on how meaning is interpreted and how individuals interact when conveying these meanings.

We began this chapter by asking what culture is. Culture is comprised of all the practices, beliefs, and behaviors of a society. Because culture is learned, it includes how people think and express themselves. While we may like to consider ourselves individuals, we must acknowledge the impact of culture; we inherit thought language that shapes our perceptions and patterned behavior, including about issues of family and friends, and faith and politics.

To an extent, culture is a social comfort. After all, sharing a similar culture with others is precisely what defines societies. Nations would not exist if people did not coexist culturally. There could be no societies if people did not share heritage and language, and civilization would cease to function if people did not agree on similar values and systems of social control.

Culture is preserved through transmission from one generation to the next, but it also evolves through processes of innovation, discovery, and cultural diffusion. We may be restricted by the confines of our own culture, but as humans we have the ability to question values and make conscious decisions. No better evidence of this freedom exists than the amount of cultural diversity within our own society and around the world. The more we study another culture, the better we become at understanding our own.



This child's clothing may be culturally specific, but her facial expression is universal. (Photo courtesy of Beth Rankin/flickr)

## Summary

There are three major theoretical approaches toward the interpretation of culture. A functionalist perspective acknowledges that there are many parts of culture that work together as a system to fulfill society's needs. Functionalists view culture as a reflection of society's values. Conflict theorists see culture as inherently unequal, based upon factors like gender, class, race, and age. An interactionist is primarily interested in culture as experienced in the daily interactions between individuals and the symbols that comprise a culture. Various cultural and sociological occurrences can be explained by these theories; however, there is no one "right" view through which to understand culture.